

Thersites

My curricular friend Thersites reports an astonishing sight: Socrates struck dumb. Yes, it's true: the pop-eyed philosopher unable to squeeze out a single jot or tittle. Thersites did not actually *see* the blessed sight himself. It was reported to him, so he tells me, by his old friends Sosages and Chipolates. They had just told Socrates that a baker had been put in charge of a friendly country's education system and.... . But I get ahead of myself. Thersites was keen that the conversation should not go unrecorded, and considered whether I would be willing to release its contents to some quality magazine with an influential readership who would be able to ensure that anything so ridiculous would never be allowed to happen in their own country. I knew at once what Thersites had in mind: **Omnibus**.

Socrates: A baker? How extremely droll. I seem to remember my old chum Aristophanes producing quite a good comedy – won a prize, didn't it? – in which a sausage-seller became the leader of the People. Are you sure it's not a joke?

Sosages: Alas, no, Socrates. But by the dog! Look! Do I mistake my eyes or is this not the very baker himself coming this way?

Socrates: Excellent. Nothing now can prevent us having a conversation about the meaning of education.

Sosages and Chipolates (together): Sweet Hermes... (they try to sneak off, but too late)

Socrates: Welcome, baker. What therefore? Not but what come now of course let us discuss the nature of education, Sosages and Chipolates sitting down on the one hand on the one hand, and you and also I sitting down on the other hand on the other hand.

Baker (smirking horribly): For how not?

What is education?

Socrates: Come then, o baker, tell me – for I wish to know – what you consider education to be and of what sort.

Baker: Of course, o Socrates. For it is whatever I say it is.

S. (gulps): If you insist. What therefore do you say it is?

B: It is maths, science, English with a little technology, geography, history, art, music, PT and a modern foreign language, for all pupil s between the ages of 11 and 16, which will take up a minimum of 70% of the school timetable, and in most schools nearer 80-90%.

S (aghast): But that, o baker, is but a list of subjects. You would not say that 'football' consists of a football, pitch, socks, boots, players and a goal. Let me therefore ask what is education *for*? For thus we may reach a better conclusion.

B: The purpose of education is to serve the needs of industry.

S: But come now. For one may as well argue that 'football' should serve the needs of 'weather forecasting'. For are not education and industry two different things on the one hand and not the same on the other?

B: Far from it at any rate, Socrates. It is my intention to make education wholly indistinguishable from industry.

S.: Why then, o baker, do you bother with education?

B: Precisely, Socrates. Hence my list of subjects.

Consultation?

S (staggers briefly): But how did you reach this conclusion? You must have discussed the matter with many wise and intelligent people before you came to it, like teachers for example.

B (bursts out laughing): Come off it, Socrates. Why should I consult that collection of incompetent, disruptive good-for-nothings? They are almost as bad as my Department of Education and Science, another bunch of squashy left-wing pseudo-liberals if ever I saw one. No Socrates, I did it all myself.

S: You must have a wonderfully wide experience of education, o baker. Have you ever been a teacher?

B: No.

S: Headmaster?

B: No.

S: An educational administrator in any capacity?

B: Never.

S: What then are your qualifications?

B: I have none at all. When it comes to education, I am a virgin thinker, untouched by experience or understanding of any sort, and thus uncorrupted. I am in the perfect position to reform the whole system.

S (*reels, but recovers gamely*): But how not, of course. Perfectly obvious. But did you really consult *no-one*?

B: Actually, no, Socrates. I consulted those in a position to help me onto the next rung of the ladder to power, er, I mean service to the community.

S: Profound thinkers, no doubt?

B: Very profound. They have their own interests deeply at heart. O yes, I also consulted the Germans.

S: The *Germans*?

B: Yes. And the Japanese. Wonderful industrialists, you know.

S: Clearly indeed. But who will teach this miraculous new education?

B: The teachers, of course.

S: But are they not tremendous incompetents, from what you say? Will they not therefore make a most enormous cods of the whole elegant scheme?

B: Not if they know what's good for them. Besides, they know I am right. Ask them. They'll tell you.

A bright idea?

S: I must make sure that I do. But come now therefore, o baker, we have discussed far and wide about the matter. Let me reach a summary of what we have been saying. Your plans to reform education will result in pupils studying a fixed regimen of *subjects*, designed to serve the needs of *industry*, based on *German* and *Japanese* practices, and taught by *incompetents*?

B: Exactly, o Socrates! What a fast learner you are.

S: It sounds a truly brilliant scheme. I assume no-one will be able to opt out of it, for it will bring such obvious benefits to all.

B: Oh no, Socrates. I am not a tyrant. Those who go to independent schools will not have to do any of it.

S: O great and wise baker, what a brilliant ploy! You mean that when those in independent schools see how revitalised the other schools are, they will leave them in droves and return into your fold?

B (temporarily baffled): Well, I er, um, actually....

S: Do not be so modest, o baker, but tell the truth.

B: I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about.

S (slumps forward, but gathers self for one last question): I thought as much. So, apart from the independent schools, everyone will be forced to enjoy the new education?

B: Correct.

S: There will be no escape?

B: None. None at all.

S: Would your lordship mind if I asked what philosophy lies behind this amazingly brilliant new system of yours?

B: Not at all, worm. It is a philosophy well known to you Greeks, Socrates. In fact you invented it.

S: What might that be?

B: Democracy, of course. You know. freedom of the people to choose what they want for themselves without interference from anyone else.

(It was at this point, as Sosages and Chipolates agreed, that Socrates found himself incapable of saying anything more)

Even Thersites, hardened as he is to the lunacies of the world, thought this took the jam doughnut. Since the baker does actually intend to impose this curriculum on schools in

England and Wales – with what consequences for Classics may be easily imagined – sixth-formers and their parents are encouraged to write to their local MPs in protest and to urge the scrapping of the whole absurd charade, or at least its modification. It is still possible to change the Bill while it goes through the Commons and the Lords, but only if MPs and Lords know your feelings. Hint: politicians respond to personal letters, preferably hand-written, from home addresses – because that is where they sense the votes are. Your Classics teacher should be able to provide help if you need it.